



DEMOCRATIC
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SPECIAL REPORT
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MAY 22, 2001

MYTHS AND FACTS ON SCHOOL VOUCHERS

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On May 22 and May 23, the House will be considering H.R. 1, ESEA Reauthorization. At that time, one of the key issues that will be debated is the issue of school vouchers – a proposal that has been **the centerpiece of the Republican education agenda** ever since Republicans gained control of Congress in 1995. Every year since 1995, the GOP leadership has worked to attempt to enact vouchers into law. It is also a proposal that was championed by George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign.

During the consideration of H.R. 1, Majority Leader Dick Armey and Majority Whip Tom DeLay will be offering two voucher amendments: 1) a broader amendment providing vouchers for students who have been attending a “low-performing” school for three years (with the voucher equal to the child’s share of Title I funding – which would be equivalent to about \$600 to \$800); and 2) an amendment providing a pilot project for vouchers, authorizing up to 5 voucher pilot projects across the country.

Following are some myths and facts regarding school vouchers.

MYTH #1: School vouchers will lead to improving the public schools, by creating competition.

FACTS: School vouchers will undermine public schools, by draining scarce taxpayer dollars from them. This will hurt the vast majority of kids who get left behind in the public schools.

Providing private school vouchers for a few children will not help to improve the quality of education for most of America’s children.

At a time when public schools are trying to cope with a record enrollment of over 52 million students and with out-of-date, crumbling facilities is the last time we should be considering diverting scarce taxpayer dollars from improving public schools to subsidizing private and religious schools.

The GOP school voucher proposal provides a select few a way out of the public schools — whereas what we need to be doing is ensuring that all of America’s children are receiving a high-quality education.

Vouchers may help a few children, but they condemn the vast majority to an inferior education by undermining efforts to improve public schools through the shift in tax dollars to private schools. The effect of vouchers would be to abandon most low-income children to more dilapidated, overcrowded, and underfunded schools.

Vouchers would pour already scarce public dollars into private and religious schools. For example, in a state that has 100,000 private school students, a voucher worth \$700 would cost the state \$70 million just to subsidize those with children already attending private schools. Just imagine the impact that an investment of \$70 million could have on improving that state's public schools instead!

Diverting public monies to private schools will do nothing to upgrade and enhance education for the vast majority of students. Indeed, it is illogical to assert that depleting the already scarce tax resources of public schools to fund private school tuition could be of any conceivable benefit to public education.

Rather than defunding the public schools, we need to be investing in the public schools.

The future of the United States depends on providing access to a high-quality education to all of our children. The GOP voucher plan is a non-answer to this challenge — draining scarce taxpayer dollars from the effort to improve the public schools.

Finally, there is no empirical evidence to support the idea that private school voucher programs stimulate improvement in the public schools — they are simply too small and too costly to have an impact.

MYTH #2: School vouchers level the playing field by providing low-income parents the same choice as wealthy parents to send their children to private and religious schools.

FACTS: Many private schools charge tuition fees that far exceed the amounts offered by any of the voucher programs being put forward by the GOP.

The GOP promise of leveling the playing field and ensuring that low-income parents have the same choices as affluent parents in choosing schools is purely illusory.

School vouchers do not cover the cost of private school tuition in most communities. Typical GOP voucher plans offer vouchers ranging from \$600 per student to \$3,000 per student. (The current Armey-DeLay amendment would provide a voucher equal to the child's share of Title I funding – which would be equivalent to about \$600 to \$800). Many private schools — certainly the most elite private schools — charge tuition fees that far exceed the amounts offered by these GOP voucher plans.

Many working families would be unable to make up the difference — making the voucher useless to them and providing the greatest benefit for wealthier families who can already afford the cost of tuition.

For example, the annual tuition at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. is \$14,500. Providing a low-income family with a voucher of \$700 does not make Sidwell Friends affordable!

Providing 100,000 students across the country with an annual voucher of \$14,500 would cost the government \$1.45 billion a year!! By contrast, an amount of \$1.45 billion a year spent on improving the public schools could have a major impact on raising educational standards, repairing crumbling schools, getting computers into every classroom, and reducing classroom size.

Furthermore, the costs of transporting a child to and from a private school — not covered by GOP voucher proposals — are prohibitively expensive for many low-income parents — thereby once again potentially making a voucher useless for them.

In the end, vouchers would create an even more stratified American educational system than already exists.

MYTH #3: School vouchers will allow parents to send their children to any school of the parents' choice.

FACTS: School vouchers give choice to private school admissions officers — they do not give choice to parents.

Vouchers may give parents the illusion of choice, but real choice remains with private school admission officers.

Private schools are very selective. Religious schools already reject as many as two out of three applicants.

Hence, the promise of a school voucher will be a hollow promise to many parents, whose children are not accepted at the private and religious schools that the parents have chosen.

Students across the country are regularly rejected from private schools on the basis of academic ability, behavior problems, religion, disability, limited English proficiency, or national origin. In addition, there is no guarantee that private schools will admit children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Furthermore, unlike public schools, whose doors are open to all students by law, private schools are free to exclude those students who tend to be more expensive to educate — students with disabilities, behavior problems, or low achievement levels. Indeed, a 1998 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that 85% of large central city private

schools surveyed by the U.S. Department of Education would “definitely or probably” NOT be willing to participate in a voucher program if they were required to accept “students with special needs such as learning disabilities, limited English proficiency, or low achievement.”

Vouchers don't give parents “school choice” — rather, they shift taxpayer dollars to private and religious schools which are highly selective in which students they will admit.

MYTH #4: The American people are demanding school vouchers.

FACTS: The American public has consistently opposed voucher proposals. Not one single statewide voucher proposal has passed.

Every major public opinion poll in the last 30 years has shown that the American people are opposed to private school voucher plans – i.e., using tax money to support private and religious schools. And every time a voucher proposal has been put before the American people, it's been voted down by a wide margin.

Specifically, over the last 29 years, seven state referenda on school vouchers and three on tuition tax credits have been held. **All of them have been defeated by large margins.**

The highest percentage of votes in favor of vouchers was on the first referendum, held in Maryland in 1972, which received 45% “yes” votes. No such initiative since then has received more than 36%.

Since 1990, there have been six ballot referenda on vouchers or tax credits that would authorize public expenditures for private schooling: two in California and one each in Oregon, Colorado, Washington and Michigan. None of them has received a “yes” vote from more than 36% of the voters. In the year 2000 alone, voters in Michigan and California voted down voucher proposals with decisive majorities, 69% and 71% respectively.

Furthermore, while voucher supporters will claim that minority communities support private school vouchers and in fact spend large sums of money to advertise directly to minority communities, minority voters overwhelmingly voted no in Michigan and California:

- ! In Michigan, African Americans voted against vouchers at even a higher rate than did whites. Exit poll data showed African Americans in that state voting vouchers down 77% to 23% while the margin against vouchers among whites was 69% to 31%.
- ! In California, Latinos also rejected vouchers by 77% to 23%, while African Americans voted no by a 68% to 32% margin.

MYTH #5: School vouchers will improve the accountability of schools.

FACTS: School vouchers will encourage the creation of “fly-by-night” schools – in it to make a quick buck, not to educate kids.

Vouchers would do for elementary and secondary education what minimally regulated federal financial aid programs have done for postsecondary education — bring us “fly-by-night” schools that enrich their owners at the expense of students and taxpayers.

This has already been the case in Milwaukee, where two voucher schools closed in 1996 as the result of criminal fraud charges. At least four other Milwaukee voucher schools closed during the first four years of the program, three of them in the middle of the school year.

As seen in Milwaukee, school voucher programs offer individuals the opportunity to turn a quick profit by opening a “school” with no experience or qualifications to provide students with a quality education.

Unlike charter schools, there is no mechanism for accountability in private school voucher plans. Ineffective schools that do not meet community expectations and needs can be funded under voucher proposals. Furthermore, there is the potential for even more dangerous situations, given the eligibility under voucher plans of even extremist groups to start schools and receive public funds.

Vouchers would shift taxpayer dollars into schools that are not accountable to the community, or to any public authority.

MYTH #6: School voucher programs are clearly constitutional.

FACTS: Most courts that have ruled on the constitutionality of school vouchers have found them to be unconstitutional.

As recently as December 11, 2000, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit declared the Cleveland school voucher program unconstitutional, upholding a lower court ruling that the use of public money to send thousands of children to parochial schools breaches the First Amendment’s separation of church and state.

In its ruling, the court noted that the Cleveland program did not present parents with a real set of options – because with a voucher of \$2,500 and tuition at nonreligious private schools much higher, 96% of the 3,761 students participating in the Cleveland program were attending parochial schools.

The court ruled:

“This scheme involves the grant of state aid directly and predominantly to the coffers of private, religious schools, and it is unquestioned that these institutions incorporate religious concepts, motives and themes into all facets of their educational planning. ... There is no neutral aid when that aid principally flows to religious institutions.”

Furthermore, in 1999, another federal appellate decision struck down a similar program in Maine, and the Supreme Courts of Vermont, Maine and Puerto Rico have also declared voucher programs unconstitutional. (The Supreme Court of Wisconsin stands out as the only high court to disagree with this view.)

MYTH #7: School vouchers would strengthen private and religious schools.

FACTS: School vouchers would ultimately weaken private and religious schools — by leading to the undermining of their independence and autonomy.

Finally, school vouchers would force private and parochial schools to become less private and less parochial. If a systemwide voucher program were adopted, the influx of public dollars into these unregulated schools would result in increased pressure for greater public scrutiny and accountability for these public expenditures.

Quality private and parochial schools are valuable parts of the educational variety in our democracy, and these pressures would ultimately interfere with their unique missions and curricula.

Some prominent conservatives have indicated their strong opposition to school vouchers for this reason.

For example, in a 1997 article in the *National Review* (9/15/97), Ronald Trowbridge, a noted conservative commentator, argued strongly against school vouchers. In the article, Trowbridge spelled out the dangers to the independence and autonomy of private and parochial schools if school voucher programs are adopted.

Following are a few excerpts from the Trowbridge article:

! *“Vouchers offer an opportunity for the government to seize control of private education.”*****

- ! ***“[Republican leaders] usually seek less government intrusion, but their action on vouchers would greatly expand the reach of government.”***
- ! ***“[Some grassroots conservatives now oppose vouchers because they] realize that government money to private schools sooner or later will be followed by government control.”***

Even some prominent conservatives understand that a voucher program would ultimately undermine the independence of private and religious schools.